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Truman's World is an Utopia or Dystopia World in Peter Weir's *The Truman Show*

Abstract: Utopia is also known as an ideal world, the term Utopia is a set of completely ideal community and society which conceived by Thomas Moore's book *Utopia*. From the past to the present, living in the Utopia world has always been the dream of many people, because in the Utopia world, everyone can from each according to his ability, to each according to his need, and helps each other. Therefore, it is obvious that Utopia world does not exist in the real society. It is only the perfect and ideal world in people's imagination. However, the issue that interests me is that if one day we can live in the Utopia world, can we get the true freedom and happiness in the Utopia world? Therefore, in this paper I will explore that Truman's World is an Utopia or dystopia world in Peter Weir's *The Truman Show*? The film *The Truman Show*, records the life of the protagonist Truman, from the way of the reality show, and it broadcasts to the real life of Truman, which is watched by hundreds of thousands of viewers around the world. As the plot progressed, Truman began to doubt the authenticity of the surrounding world and tried to find ways to escape from Seahaven. In the end, he success to escape from a dystopia world, Seahaven. The purpose of this paper is to use the theory of Utopia which proposed by Thomas More to analysis that Truman's world is an Utopia or dystopia world? In my point of view, I think Truman is lives in a dystopia world, because the Seahaven which look like an Utopia world, in fact, it is all artificially arranged, which causes that Truman cannot get true freedom and happiness in Seahaven. Therefore,

Seahaven is indeed a dystopia world.

Keywords: Utopia, Dystopia, Seahaven, Freedom, Happiness.

I. Introduction

Peter Weir was born on August 21, 1944 in Sydney. He is an Australian film director. He is often closely linked to the Australian film renaissance of the 1970s. The film *The Truman Show* is an American science fiction film in 1998, which directed by Peter Weir, and written by Andrew Niccol. After the film was release, it was won the praise. The film *The Truman Show*, is a story about Truman lives in the Seahaven which like an Utopia world. Now, he is thirty years old, and he is the agent of an insurance company. On the surface, he lives the same life as the general people. What he didn't know, however, was that everything about his life was artificially arranged. The entire Seahaven is actually a huge studio, not a real Utopia world. The people around him, including his wife, his mother, the most trusted friends, his colleagues and passers-by are all professional actors, and he is the protagonist of the TV show called *The Truman Show*. When he began to doubt the authenticity of the world around him, he tried to find a way to escape from Seahaven. In the end, he success to escape from a dystopia world, Seahaven.

The reason that I'm interesting in the film *The Truman Show* is because I think that when we live in the real life, we always eager for lives in the Utopia world. However, if one day we can live in the Utopia world, can we get the true freedom and happiness in the Utopia world? In fact, I don't think so. The reason is because that all the glorious in the Utopia world is just an illusion, it is artificially arranged, and do not get real freedom and happiness. Thus, my purpose of this paper is use the theory of Utopia which proposed by Thomas More to analysis that Truman's world is an Utopia or dystopia world? In my point of view, I think Truman is lives in a dystopia world, because the Seahaven which look like an Utopia world,

in fact, it is all artificially arranged, which causes that Truman cannot get true freedom and happiness in Seahaven. Therefore, Seahaven is indeed a dystopia world.

II. Literature Review

In Peter Weir's *The Truman Show*, several paper themes of escapism, regulate and hegemony, surveillance, and dystopia or utopia has been presented. In Cong Dong's paper, he tries to explain that the three kinds of escapism ways that the director Peter Weil expressed in the film *The Truman Show*. Including the escapism of the director, the audience's negative escapism, positive to search the world and the objective escapism of Truman. The first escapism way, due to the hate the reality world, so the escapism way of the director is he use his studio to create an ideal utopia world, Seaheaven, and finished his ideal in mind. According to Cong Dong, "The reason why the director built such a world is because he hates reality, hates the shortcomings of human nature in the real world, so he created a 'harmonious' Seahaven world, created Truman's 'beautiful life' in the Seahaven world. This explains Christopher is an idealist in his heart, he wants to use Seahaven town to realize his ideal" (373; emphasis in original). The second escapism way, the audience's negative escapism is through watching the reality show's utopian world to satisfy their inner hollow and the desire to escape the reality. According to Cong Dong, "In real life, every one of us all have many dreams, Truman's world is the assemblage of people's all kinds of dreams for life" (373). In addition, "People always have peep desire when they feel empty, they wish to enrich their inner souls by understanding others inner world" (Dong 373). The third escapism way, Truman is so positive to search the world and objective escapism, it means that he escapes the reality from an objective perspective. He states that, Truman's process of escaping from reality is divided into three stages, which are optimistic, doubt, and adventure. According to Cong Dong:

At first, he was very satisfied with everything in life. . . this stage his

inner did not change much. Then, due to the variety of mechanical failures or human accidents, Truman gradually doubted this world, he thought “the whole world seemed to turn around by me”, which was the first shake of his heart. The final stage is the key to impel Truman must leave this “world”, after talked with Malone he determined to escape from this imprisoned world and began the adventure road, Truman eventually left Seahaven and start a new life. (373; emphasis in original)

In Dusty Lavoie’s research, he analyzes the power, ideology and hegemony in *The Truman Show*, and clarifying the conditions of Truman as a panoramic object who is regulated and hegemonized under the watchful eye of the *The Truman Show*’s producer Christof. He states that Truman’s conditions is like the theory of panopticism which proposed by Michel Foucault. The Seaheaven that Truman lives is actually a huge studio with hundreds of monitors that monitor the life of Truman every day. According to Dusty Lavoie, Foucault mentioned that the condition of inner panopticon, “With an observer or camera virtually everywhere, one cannot presume that one is in a private sphere at any time, and thus, Bentham theorized, the prisoners would begin to self-regulate, producing a self-propelling machine of fear, paranoia, and watchedness” (60).

On the other hand, he thinks that the different conditions between Truman and prisoners in the panopticon is these prisoners have the consciousness of prisoners, so they will voluntarily act follow the gaze of the strong. However, Truman did not have this kind of awareness at the beginning, because he did not realize that he was being watched by others. According to Dusty Lavoie, “. . . the prisoners’ awareness of their being watched and their unawareness of exactly when or from what angle they are being watched. The result, at least theoretically, is that the prisoner would voluntarily behave under the Godlike gaze of the powerful” (63). In contrast, “Truman’s panopticon is unique because he suffers from a double unawareness : He does not know that or how he is being watched. . .” (Lavoie 63).

In Peter Marks's paper, he explores the surveillance matters. He pointed out that in the reality show *The Truman Show*, Truman is monitored from the personal identity, privacy, the organization of social space and practice. Furthermore, surveillance has become to the entertainment for audiences. According to Marks, "Reflecting on the emerging (but at that point not ubiquitous) genre of reality television, *The Truman Show* examines such important and established surveillance concepts as identity, privacy, the organization of social space and practices, and the utilisation of personal information for control" (226-27; parentheses in original). In addition, he states that *The Truman Show* is a convincing tempting dystopia prison. "This tension between utopian and dystopian possibilities and imperatives signals *The Truman Show* as a critical dystopia, one that offers a compelling account of a seductive dystopian prison, and a freer, and therefore utopian world beyond" (Marks 227).

In Megan Lynn Roche's paper, she analysis that *The Truman Show* is a genre of criticizes dystopia or utopia. According to Roche:

. . . the film is critical dystopia because Truman escapes the fabricated set of Seahaven leaving the audience with a sense of hope for the future.

However, *The Truman Show* does not fit neatly within critical dystopia or critical utopia since the diegetic-audience views Seahaven as a utopia without the problems of urban life whilst Truman views it as dystopic

fabricated world. (2) In addition, she believes that *The Truman Show* is a dystopia performance of the problem of dystopia entertainment consumerism. "The Truman show leads us to believe that we are able to freely criticise the entertainment industry but in actual fact, because they provide us with the criticisms, we are not as 'free' as they would have us believe" (2; emphasis in original).

In Craig Smith's comment, he pointed out that the similar and different aspects of the story between Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* and George Orwell's *1984*. In regard to the similar aspects, he states that the two main heroine Julia and Sylvia are use sex as a rebellious

ideology. According to Smith, “. . . Julia and Sylvia, who both engage in sexual activity with the main character as a way to go against the common normality and make a statement against what the society stands for.” Another similar aspect, he states that the two protagonists Winston and Truman endorse the idea of retaining memories. “Both characters share a dislike of the partners they’ve been ‘given,’ and retain the memories of the things they desire, from real, actual sex to a partner who truly cares” (Smith; emphasis in original).

On the other hand, the different aspect is the government of *The Truman Show* could not remove the mistakes that Truman made, but the government of 1984 can rewrite and change the history and past. According to Smith, “Sylvia Garland will always be a piece of that show’s fabricated history, unable to be deleted. If this were to take place within the same societal framework as 1984, however, the history would be destroyed. Those who go against the government of Big Brother are taken out of history, permanently, forever.”

III. Aims and Contributions

Except for the above mentioned themes, in this paper, I aim to use the theory of Utopia which proposed by Thomas More to analysis that Truman’s world Seahaven is an Utopia or dystopia world? My further ideas is to let people knows that living in Utopia world does not necessarily can get true freedom and happiness. Due to the Utopia world is artificially arranged, and it is not that we can work hard to create the life we want. Therefore, the theory of Utopia is explained and explored as follow.

IV. The Theory of Utopia

The term of Utopia is comes from Thomas More’s theory of Utopia. “More coined the word to describe an island community with an ideal mode of government. First published in Latin in 1517, the book *Utopia* means ‘no place’ in Greek; some scholars have said that it

may also be a pun on ‘happy place’” (Hodgkinson; emphasis in original). According to Thomas More, “Utopia offers us a glimpse of an alternative. Utopia, broadly conceived, is an image of a world not yet in existence that is different from and better than the world we inhabit now” (x). Utopia is a perfect ideal republic, especially for legal, government and social situations. Utopia is a fictional island in Atlantic, which built by Thomas Moore’s book *Utopia*. The countries on this island have a set of perfect social, political and legal system. This term is used to describe a society of ideal society and literary fiction called the intentional community. This concept also leads to the concept of dystopia. According to Thomas Moore:

Between the two poles of the political spectrum, for those in the center who simply hold on to the ideal of democracy, Utopia can also be problematic. Democracy is a system in which ordinary people determine, directly or through representation, the system that governs the society they live within. Utopias, however, are usually the products of singular imaginations or, at best, the plans of a small group: a political vanguard or artistic avant-garde. Utopians too often consider people as organic material to be shaped, not as willful agents who do the shaping; the role of the populace is, at best, to conform to a plan of a world already delivered complete. (xi-xii)

More divided Utopia into two main focuses. First, the world of Utopia must be built on the condition that there is no private space and goods. Therefore, everyone must unselfishly share their goods. According to Eva Eylers, “With Utopia More suggests an extreme position where what we today consider the interplay between public and private space is concerned. Private space simply does not exist in utopia. Doors are always open, everything takes place under the public eye and a more or less constant participation in and confrontation with public life is not an option but an imperative” (6). There is no private space and goods in the Utopia world, however, people

still selfishness in a certain degree and do not want to share their private spaces and goods that they have. “Since a good community ‘could not be simply a collection of individuals, each one of whom insists upon some private and particular happiness without respect to welfare and interests of his fellows’” (Eylers 8; qtd. in Arendt xl).

Second, the city walls represent the protection of the people in the Utopia world. Therefore, everything within the city walls which represent an ideal and perfect nation and reject people to have thought of any change in the future. According to Eva Eylers, “In the utopian isolation through man-made or natural borderlines and especially in the city wall, we can recognize both a protective and a defensive function. The city wall furthermore symbolically manifests the idea of stasis, the maintenance of one particular (ideal) moment and the denial of future change” (9; parentheses in original).

V. The Theory and the Text

For Truman, the Seahaven that he has lived for 30 years, looks like a paradise, has the efficient governments, and people can live and work in peace and contentment. Truman’s personal life is having ample food and clothing, friends, wife, and work also eclectic. It seems that the whole world revolves around him. This kind of life and society is like the ideal Utopia world which created by Thomas Moore’s book. Utopia is an imaginary island in Atlantic, which means an ideal perfect republic. The countries on this island have a set of perfect social, political and legal system. “Private space simply does not exist in Utopia” (Eylers 6). The world of Utopian must be built on the condition that there is no private space and goods. Therefore, everyone must unselfishly share their goods. According to Thomas More, “Utopia offers us a glimpse of an alternative. Utopia, broadly conceived, is an image of a world not yet in existence that is different from and better than the world we inhabit now” (x).

However, Seahaven is actually a dystopia world. This kind of life is full of harmony

and goodness in the surface, but the inner is a hypocritical spiritual world. Filled with all kinds of false feelings, interest chasing, is an extremely desperate world. According to Thomas Moore:

Democracy is a system in which ordinary people determine, directly or through representation, the system that governs the society they live within. Utopias, however, are usually the products of singular imaginations or, at best, the plans of a small group: a political vanguard or artistic avant-garde. Utopians too often consider people as organic material to be shaped, not as willful agents who do the shaping; the role of the populace is, at best, to conform to a plan of a world already

delivered complete. (xi-xii) As time went by, Truman gradually discovered that there were too many coincidences and illogical events in his life. For example, almost every day, a pair of twins will be met in the same place, and Truman will ask if they are buying insurance; the conversation between Truman's wife Meryl and Truman always seems to be a gap between them; vehicles and pedestrians on the street always perform some of the same activities at the same frequency; strangers rushed to take photos with him; and his father, who had already died, suddenly appeared. In the end, when Truman's first love lover Sylvia told him the truth, he discovered that his life was completely follow the already written script. As for Seahaven, it was just a huge studio, and everybody he sees every day is actually professional actors who has been arranged, including the things that he sees are also props, and the sunrise and sunset are just scenes of technology fiction. According to Peter Weir's The Truman Show:

SYLVIA. We have so little time. They're going to be here any minute. They don't want me to talk to you.

TRUMAN. Then don't talk.

SYLVIA. Listen to me. Everybody knows about you. Everybody knows

everything you do. They're pretending, Truman, do you understand?

SYLVIA. It's fake. It's all for you. It's a set. It's a show. Everybody is watching you. Truman, get out of here. Come and find me.

Whether someone who is living in an Utopia world like Truman or actors, they cannot get true freedom and happiness, because they all have to live according to the established script. Christof, the producer of *The Truman Show*, used all means to influence Truman's thinking, habits and life in order to control him. Even the actors can only follow the artificially arranged movements, revealing the set expressions, without real feelings, and there is no room for free expression of speech. This is a desperate world. In addition, the audience outside the lens is also the same, hoping to make up for the regret of their hypocritical life by paying attention to the real life of others, which shows the emptiness of the audience and the desire and pursuit of living in the real life.

The pain, happiness, incitement, hesitation, and the growth and release of desires, the germination and fragmentation of ideals that Truman experienced, the things that originally belonged to him, are now exposed to the eyes of billions of people, and become the entertainment of everyone in the world. Therefore, only Truman is kept in the dark. When Truman finally tried to leave Seahaven from the sea, he found that the sea and the sky in front of him were also fictional scenes. *The Truman Show's* producer Christof let everyone wear a mask to lock them in a cage. Seahaven itself is a cage, with thousands of cameras facing it every day. Everything within the Seahaven which represent an ideal and perfect nation and reject people to have thought of any change in the future. According to Eva Eylers, "In the utopian isolation through man-made or natural borderlines and especially in the city wall, we can recognize both a protective and a defensive function. The city wall furthermore symbolically manifests the idea of stasis, the maintenance of one particular (ideal) moment and the denial of future change" (9; parentheses in original). For Truman, every mood and every detail is under the control of others. According to Peter Weir's *The Truman Show*:

CHRISTOF. I have given Truman the chance to lead a normal life. The world, the place you live in, is the sick place. Seahaven is the way the world should be.

CHRISTOF. There's no more truth out there than in the world I created for you. The same lies, the same deceit. But in my world, you have nothing to fear. I know you better than you do.

TRUMAN BURBANK. You never had a camera in my head.

CHRISTOF. You're afraid. That's why you can't leave. It's okay, Truman. I understand. I have been watching your whole life. I was watching when you were born. I was watching when you took your first step. I watched you on your first day of school. The episode when you lost your first tooth. You can't leave, Truman.

Therefore, Christof uses advanced technology to monitor Truman's daily life. In the above mentioned, Seahaven itself is a cage, with thousands of cameras facing it every day. Christof regard Seahaven as a cage and use to monitors Truman's every move, this kind of situation is similar with the theory of panopticism which proposed by Michel Foucault. Foucault's panopticism is based on Jeremy Bentham's panopticon. The Panopticon is a ring-shaped building with a tower in the middle where you can see every cell where prisoners are imprisoned. There are no windows between the rooms, and prisoners who living inside can't get in touch with each other. Prisoners can always see the tower, but they never know where they are being monitored. Any activity in the room can't escape the surveillance of the guards, so prisoners in the room will always be the subject of supervision. According to Moya K. Mason, "The Panopticon is not a dream building, but a diagram of power reduced to its ideal form. It perfects the operations of power by increasing the number of people who can be controlled, and decreasing the number needed to operate it. It gives power over people's minds through architecture. As it can be inspected from outside, there is no danger of

tyranny.”

Truman, who lives in Seahaven, is facing the same situation with prisoners in panopticon. They are constantly being monitored for twenty four hours and cannot get true freedom. However, the only difference is that the prisoners in panopticon knows that they have been monitored all the time, but Truman is the only one who is kept in the dark. He doesn't know that his life is being watched by people all over the world for twenty four hours. This shows that when the high-tech technology is get involve with our lives would causes many problems. It was originally used to control the prisoners, in order to enable them to be self-disciplined, it has now evolved into a tool for monitoring the life of general people, which invasion of privacy.

In the end, Christof wants Truman to make a decision between the freedom of the morbid world and to be a carefree puppet. Even though Truman knows that the world outside of Seahaven maybe more cruel and hypocritical, but in the end Truman choose to leave the Seahaven of a dystopia world, because even the real world is more cruel than Seahaven, but at least it can get rid of man-made script, and live a true freedom and happiness life.

VI. Conclusion

From the past to the present, living in the Utopia world has always been the dream of many people, because in the Utopia world, everyone can from each according to his ability, to each according to his need, and helps each other. Therefore, it is obvious that Utopia world does not exist in the real society. It is only the perfect and ideal world in people's imagination. The film *The Truman Show* is a story about the Seahaven that Truman has lived for 30 years, looks like a paradise. His life and society is like the ideal Utopia world which created by Thomas Moore's book. However, the entire Seahaven is actually a huge studio, not a real Utopia world. Whether someone who is living in an Utopia world like Truman or actors, they cannot get true freedom and happiness, because they all have to live according to the

established script. In addition, the audience outside the lens is also the same, hoping to make up for the regret of their hypocritical life by paying attention to the real life of others, which shows the emptiness of the audience and the desire and pursuit of living in the real life.

The Truman Show's producer Christof let everyone wear a mask to lock them in a cage. Seahaven itself is a cage, with thousands of cameras facing it every day. This kind of situation is the similar with the theory of panopticism which proposed by Michel Foucault. Truman, who lives in Seahaven, is facing the same situation with the prisoners in panopticon. They are constantly being monitored for twenty four hours and cannot get true freedom. This shows that when the high-tech technology is get involve with our lives would causes many problems. It was originally used to control the prisoners, in order to enable them to be self-disciplined, it has now evolved into a tool for monitoring the life of general people, which invasion of privacy. Everything within the Seahaven which represent an ideal and perfect nation and reject people to have thought of any change in the future. Due to the utopia world is artificially arranged, and it is not that we can work hard to create the life we want. Therefore, even though Truman knows that the world outside of Seahaven maybe more cruel and hypocritical, but in the end Truman choose to leave the Seahaven of a dystopia world, because even the real world is more cruel than Seahaven, but at least it can get rid of man-made script, and live a true freedom and happiness life.

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